The Cavaliers caught a break before they tipped off against the Dallas Mavericks in American Airlines Center on Sunday night. Dirk Nowitzki, the gifted German who is enjoying one of his finest seasons, was on the shelf courtesy of a collision with Houston's Carl Landry Friday night. With Dirk's 26 points and eight rebounds shorn from Dallas's attack, a golden opportunity was at hand for the Cavaliers to begin their first Western swing on a positive note. Consider the opportunity lost. With the rest of the team stepping up in Dirk's absence, the Mavericks topped the Cavaliers, 102-95. Jesse tells us about it.

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Consider the opportunity lost. With the rest of the team stepping up in Dirk's absence, the Mavericks topped the Cavaliers, 102-95. And while Dallas rose to the occasion, the Cavaliers shrank. They simply could not get that one stop, that

one score, to carry them over the top. Other than Delonte West and to an extent Anderson Varejao, no one in Wine & Gold brought their A-Game. To say the least, this was not the optimum way to start the road trip.

The Cavaliers are 20-8, but they have not played good basketball lately. If they don't start playing good basketball now, this trip could turn disastrous in a hurry.

Dallas's to Lose: Almost from the start, the Mavericks controlled the pace of Sunday night's game. After the midway point of the second period Cleveland never led, and every time the Cavaliers appeared in position to get back in front, Dallas had an answer. On two occasions in the second half Cleveland drew to within a basket of the lead, but couldn't get over the hump either time. The Cavaliers would either sabotage themselves with a wasted offensive possession or the Mavericks would respond with a bucket on the other end. Time and time again Dallas would build a relatively substantial lead, Cleveland would respond to draw close, only to repeat the cycle. It was immensely frustrating.

LeBron's Line: 25 points on 9-of-23 from the field, 2-of-6 from three-point range and 5-of-7 from the free-throw line with six assists, three rebounds, two steals and two blocks. LeBron did not play well, at all. Too often he stalled the Cleveland offense by dribbling out the clock and forcing up poorly considered shots with sour results. Worse, he played 43 minutes on Sunday night- not a good thing with the Cavaliers on the first half a back-to-back.

One-Room Shaq: LeBron James did not play well at all... but Shaquille O'Neal was just flat-out awful. Facing an undersized Dallas lineup Shaq went 1-of-7 from the floor, much of those misses on bunnies from point-blank range, and finished with five points in 18 dismal minutes. Maybe the big man was pacing himself for Monday's meeting with his former Phoenix teammates; we can only hope that was the case, at least.

Tim Freaking Thomas: The journeyman forward (nine teams in thirteen seasons)

entered the night averaging 7.6 points in 16 minutes per night. He got the start in place of Nowitski on Sunday night and responded with 22 points and seven rebounds in 36 minutes, coming within four points of equaling Dirk's average output in points. Thanks to Thomas's big night the expected drop-off in production without Dirk just didn't happen.

Reserve Power: Even with Thomas in the lineup, Dallas's bench still performed brilliantly. Jason Terry, Josh Howard and Drew Gooden combined for 45 points off the pine, outscoring Cleveland's bench (which had a pretty good night itself) by four. The Cavaliers didn't play well, but you have to give the Mavericks credit. They rose to the occasion and Cleveland didn't. It was as simple as that.

The Losing Sequence: For all intents and purposes the Cavaliers lost the game in the opening four minutes of the second half, which began with Dallas clinging to a 52-50 lead. Cleveland missed its first eight shots of the half and fell behind by twelve at 63-51, and although the Cavaliers made several mini-runs to stay close, they were never able to get over the hump.

Defense (Or Lack Thereof): The Cavaliers didn't help their own cause with an indifferent effort on the defensive end. Chopping up Cleveland's defense with dribble penetration and forays into the lane off screens, Dallas shot 47.5 percent for the game, dished out 25 assists and committed just six turnovers. The Mavericks really heated up in the crucial fourth period, hitting four of their first five from the field and shooting 11-of-19 (57.8 percent) for the stanza. The Mavericks had an answer for just about every Cleveland run.

The Microcosm: Cleveland's best opportunity to take command of the game late turned into a symbol of its futility on Sunday night. Trailing by one at 84-83 with 6:30 left in the fourth, Delonte West (18 points, seven rebounds, four assists) drew a moving screen to hand possession back to the Cavaliers with a chance to take the lead. Instead, a disjointed offensive possession concluded with LeBron firing up a long three-point shot as the clock ran out. It missed, Dallas responded with an Erick Dampier lay-up, and the golden opportunity had gone a-glimmering.

Next: Monday night at 9:00 when the Cavaliers invade the Valley of the Sun to take on Phoenix. And if they don't put forth a better effort than Sunday's crap-fest, the Suns are going to run them right to California.